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ABSTRACT

First and fifth grade boys' interest in a televised portrayal of violence and their expressions of empathic pain in response to the victims' pain cues were examined as variables moderating their aggressive behavior toward a peer. The 27 subjects viewed a violent videotaped stimulus which consisted of a fight between two men and which included segments that clearly revealed the pain cues of the victims of the violence. These cues consisted of vocalizations of pain as well as close-up shots of the victims' facial expressions of pain. In order to assess the subjects' affective reactions, video recordings of their faces were made as they viewed the televised stimulus. Following the televised violence and the recording of the facial expressions, the subjects' willingness to behave aggressively toward a peer was assessed using a modified version of Liebert and Baron's "Help/Hurt" apparatus. The subjects were put in a position of being able to hurt or help another child's chances of succeeding on a difficult task. Regression analyses indicated that empathic expressions of pain recorded on the faces of the older boys while viewing a victim's pain was negatively correlated with subsequent aggression toward a peer. In contrast, expressions of interest and pain during the high-violence segments of the televised violence significantly predicted higher levels of aggression toward a peer by the younger boys. These results are discussed in terms of older boys' ability to monitor their emotional arousal and to use arousal cues in the control of their aggressive behavior. (Author/MP)

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Moderators of Boys' Aggressive Reactions to Violence: Empathy and Interest

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Moderators of Boys' Aggressive Reactions to Violence: Empathy and Interest

The effects of televised violence on children's aggression has received extensive research attention. Considerable controversy exists about this literature since the accumulated findings are mixed and have provided no clear, convincing explication of the nature of the relationship between viewing television violence and children's aggressive behavior. This state of affairs is due in part to the fact that the research in this area has tended to be "main effects" research seeking to establish whether or not televised violence serves to instigate aggressive behavior in children. Inadequate attention has been paid to the moderator variables that might clarify the relationship between exposure to televised violence and aggressive responding.

Two classes of moderator variables can be distinguished: 1) intra-presentational stimulus factors or characteristics of television content, and 2) individual characteristics of the viewer. Based on findings from earlier research (e.g., Goranson, Note 1, 1970; Hartmann, 1969), the explicitness of the pain cues of the victim appears to be a likely candidate as a television content characteristic that may moderate children's response to viewing violence. A corresponding individual characteristic of viewers that has also been suggested as a moderator of children's aggression is their tendency to respond empathically to the suffering of victims of aggression (Feshbach & Feshbach, 1969; Hoffman, 1978).

This paper concerns a developmental examination of the moderating effects of boys' emotional reactions to a violent television stimulus on their subsequent aggressive behavior toward a peer. The data presented here are a subset of the data collected as part of a larger television effects study (Steinman, Note 2). Based on theoretical treatments of empathy (e.g., Feshbach & Feshbach, 1969; Hoffman, 1978), it was hypothesized that empathic emotional reactions to the suffering of a victim of violence would be associated with less post-viewing aggression. Based on previous findings (Ekman, Liebert, Friesen, Harrison, Zlatchin, Malmstrom, and Baron, 1972), it was also hypothesized that boys who showed higher levels of interest in televised violence subsequently would display higher levels of postviewing aggression.

Thirteen first grade and fourteen fifth grade boys first viewed a violent videotaped stimulus which consisted of a fight between two men and which included segments that clearly revealed the pain cues of the victims of the violence. These cues consisted of vocalizations of pain as well as close-up shots of the victims' facial expressions of pain. In order to assess the boys' affective reactions while viewing, video-recordings of the boys' faces were made as they viewed the video stimulus. Four five-second samples of the facial behavior of each subject were selected for analysis. Two of these captured the boys' facial reactions to explicit pain cues in the television stimulus and the other two were samples of facial behavior in response to "high action" violence during which no pain cues were visable. These selected samples of facial expressions during viewing were subsequently analyzed according to a modification of a system developed by Izard (Note 3) in which the

facial muscle movements associated with emotional expressions of pain and of interest were scored by raters who were blind to the nature of the television stimulus (inter-rater reliability = .83).

Following exposure to the televised violence and the recording of the facial expressions, a measure of the boys' willingness to behave aggressively toward a peer was assessed using a modified version of the "Help/Hurt" apparatus used by Liebert and Baron (1972). The boys were put in a position where they were able to hurt or help the chances of another (fictitious) child to succeed on a difficult task.

Regression analyses were used to assess the extent to which the boys' aggressive responding (operationalized as total duration of "hurt" responses over ten trials) was predicted by their facial expressions of pain and interest during the "high action" violence and violence-plus-pain-cues segments. These analyses revealed a very different pattern of results for the older and younger boys. For the fifth grade boys, the only significant predictor of aggressive responding following exposure to violence was the extent to which they showed empathic pain expressions in response to the pain cues segments of the televised violence ($F = 11.8$, $df = 1, 12$, $p = .006$). Scores for empathic expressions of pain were negatively correlated (-.69) with duration of aggressive responding.

In contrast, for first grade boys, the best predictors of aggressive behavior following exposure to televised violence were facial expressions of pain and interest in response to the "high action" violence segments of the video stimulus ($F = 8.13$, $df = 2, 10$, $p = .008$). Both pain expressions and interest were positively correlated with

with subsequent aggression toward a peer (.67 and .32 respectively), and the multiple r for these two variables was .79.

Thus, among the older boys, empathic emotional responses to the pain of a victim of violence viewed on television was associated with less subsequent aggression toward a peer following this exposure, while among the younger boys, emotional responses to the pain of a victim did not play a significant role in their subsequent aggressive responding. Rather, with these younger boys, pain expressions in response to high action violence in which pain cues were not evident, and their apparent interest in these segments, were associated with higher levels of aggressive responding toward a peer following exposure to televised violence.

While the finding for the older boys was consistent with expectations, the finding for the younger boys was unexpected in two respects. First, there was no significant relationship between facial expressions of pain in response to pain cues and subsequent aggressive behavior. Second, and particularly surprising, was the obtained positive correlation between facial reactions of pain in response to the high action violence segments and subsequent aggressive behavior. Although the relatively small sample size in this study dictates that any interpretation of the findings be regarded as suggestive rather than conclusive, the findings invite speculation regarding possible developmental changes in the ways in which boys at different age levels process emotional arousal.

For example, the findings for the younger boys is consistent with an arousal hypothesis of television violence effects. That is, facial expressions of pain and interest in response to the high action violence

segments may have reflected a generalized increase in arousal which resulted in increased post-viewing aggression. In contrast, the finding for the older boys was consistent with our hypothesis that empathically aroused distress would be associated with inhibition of aggression.

An explanation for this developmental change in the relation between boys' emotional reactions to violence and their subsequent aggressive responding comes from a recent study of children's understanding of their own emotional reactions to emotional events. In a developmental study of children's empathic understanding, Hughes, Tingle, & Sawin (Note 4) found that younger children rely mainly on the most salient situational cues in identifying their emotional reactions to emotional events occurring to others. Older children, on the other hand, focus more on person cues such as the other person's facial expressions in making attributions about their own emotional reactions to the emotional events occurring to others. This suggests the possiblity that the older boys in this study were more attentive to the expressions of pain on the victims' faces than the younger boys, and were more likely to use these cues to label their own emotional arousal as distress. This empathic distress then served to inhibit their aggressive behavior. The younger boys, on the other hand, may have focussed principally on the more salient violent action than on the pain cues of the victims, and were less likely to make inferences about the internal feeling states of the victims. They thus experienced arousal without feeling the empathic distress that might have inhibited their post-viewing aggression.

This interpretation must be regarded as tentative pending confirmation by further evidence, but it suggests the importance of children's social perception, social cognition, and emotional processes as interacting moderators of their behavioral reactions to emotion eliciting events. The findings from this study indicate that both developmental changes and individual differences in these affective-cognitive processes need to be considered in future research. Further studies, ideally incorporating other indices of emotional arousal, such as physiological measures, as well as further exploration of the role of cognition in children's emotional experience, would be valuable in pursuing the complex and to date elusive question of the nature of television violence effects on children's aggressive behavior.

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